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ABSTRACT

Graduate students do need and can benefit from instruction in the basis of composition, but the definition of what each student basically needs will vary so greatly that individual instruction is the only meaningful way to meet those needs. The demand for such instruction spurred the development of a graduate course at North Texas State University called "Studies in the Teaching of Composition." Two sections were established, one for foreign students concerned with mastering unfamiliar English basics, and one for native speakers with widely ranging needs. Students in this latter group worked toward mastery of skills needed for publication and successful completion of master's theses. Although more time was required to give students this individualized instruction, the positive effects of one-to-one tutoring were clearly visible. (KS)

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Basically, Graduate Students Need Individual Attention

J. F. Kobler

My principal position or argument centers on this thesis: graduate students do need and can benefit from instruction in the basics of composition, but the definition of what each student basically needs will vary so greatly that individual instruction (tutorial) is the only meaningful way to meet those needs. One assumption lies behind this thesis: that graduate instruction in composition is now almost as necessary as instruction in the various disciplines, but that it is not received in most graduate courses, including literature courses. At least one conclusion grows out of my experience with graduate tutorials in composition: the time and the effort spent on each individual are well spent, more often than not.

First, two words about finances at state universities in Texas: the more enrollments we muster the more money we get from the state; graduate registrations pay a lot more money than do undergraduate ones.

Therefore, when I found myself consistently teaching one or two graduate students each semester in a senior level course in composition, I told the departmental executive committee that we should start offering a graduate course. Why not? The income from each registration will be just about tripled, and the students will receive (as long as I am doing it) at least the same kind and quality of instruction. Besides, the associate dean of the College of Business Administration was leaning on the English Department to do something about all his foreign graduate students who could not write well in English.

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So in the fall of 1975 we borrowed for this experiment a graduate course called "Studies in the Teaching of Composition," which we normally offer at night and in the summer for MEd candidates. We scheduled two sections, one designated for foreign students, or international students, as some prefer to call them. The foreign student enthusiasm was so great (or the pressure from the associate dean so strong) that we enrolled enough for two sections of six or seven students each. My course enrollment was seven. The other instructor and I set up individual schedules for each student, never meeting the groups in a classroom situation. We saw them as often as once a week and at least once every two weeks.

Because space limitations and my greater knowledge of where my own instruction failed or succeeded, I talk here primarily about the students I tutored. But I can report that the work with the international students was so collectively successful that we ran in the spring of 1976 two more tutorial sections for them, taught by two other instructors with the assistance of a graduate teaching fellow.

The students' purposes in registering for my section were varied. The basics they wanted to learn about were different. In fact, some of the things they wanted to learn or to accomplish might not even be called basic by the teacher of freshman composition. But certainly from another point of view, these things are basic to writing at other levels.

For example, my two English doctoral candidates wanted basic instruction in writing articles for publication. Each came already

equipped with a subject for a paper. One was the outgrowth of his reading (but not his term paper) in an 18th century course and the other of his personal interest in Tolkein. (Actually, I had two other doctoral students enrolled at the very beginning of the semester but they dropped when it was decreed ex cathedra that English doctoral credit could not be given for this course. As an official of the department put it, "polishing up a term paper for publication is not worth three hours of credit." I discussed that proposition with him to no avail.) But two students stayed, being more interested in learning something different (and basic to their futures, perhaps) than in accumulating further credits.

While I'm being nasty and laying unnamed bodies at my feet, let me say a few words against the usual term paper, the kind of paper that somehow is supposed to synthesize materials in a course. I do not really understand why the majority of my colleagues go right on year after year making students churn out term papers of this sort when they are such an artificial appendage on the body academic. I take that back. I do know why. Such papers can be assigned and forgotten until they are due at the end of the semester. Then a grade can be put on them and they can be handed back. (I like to assume that they are always read). If the paper is thoroughly marked up and questioned (which many I have seen are not) do even the most conscientious students go through them comment by comment to learn what they have done well or badly? Frankly, I doubt it.

Such procedures with term papers, I contend teach almost nothing about composition, basic or otherwise.

Meanwhile, back at the tutorial branch of instruction, my two English majors were being asked to take what I thought was a basic first step. I asked them to compare some term papers they had written with some published journal articles. We discussed what they discovered; actually, each one suspected in advance what he verified for himself as being true: even the best term papers generally illustrate only that the writer knows some facts, can use the library, can borrow critical ideas and document them, and may even write passable English prose. Published articles generally (not always, I will admit) indicate mastery of those previously mentioned abilities, and additionally reveal an ability to read, interpret, and think for oneself.

Additional basic knowledge about the differences between a term paper and a published article which these students garnered through their own work and my discussions with them included the importance of an awareness of audience and purpose. They became fully aware as they never had been before that there are more ways to write than one--that academic term paperese is not the only language in the world.

After exhausting these initial pedagogical practices, I spent the remainder of the semester playing the role of a hardboiled editor, an asker of tough questions, a stylistic whiplasher. Eschew the expletive I kept saying. Over the semester each student went through three toughly evaluated versions of his paper. Actually, one of them was working on a four-page note and the long paper. He got both ready for submission to a real editor.

Each student ended up with what I considered publishable papers. Whether they will actually ever be published is not yet decided. The

two major papers are still out to periodicals. The shorter one has been returned with the usual general regrets.

Two other students registered for this course in order to learn how to get a masters thesis written, or may be even to get one written. One thesis is in anthropology and the other in speech communications. I am, of course, something less than an expert in either field, but the basics of composition can cross departmental lines.

The anthropology student was trying to do a study of the Latin American community in Dallas to determine if there is a Latin American middle class there and, if so, how it differs from the Anglo Saxon middle class. This may sound more like sociology than anthropology to you, as it does to me, but mine was not to try to distinguish fish from fowl. This student really was (and still is) floundering, whatever her field, or sea. She wrote reasonably good English sentences, which made sense most of the time, but she did not have any idea how to begin gathering her information or putting it into some sort of order. She apparently had never been forced to think and plan on her own, although she alleged that she had written many successful term papers. (Her work, by the way, was being done at a university in Mexico, so I was serving as a sort of surrogate director.) Whatever my title, I spent two hours almost every week trying to help her develop her research techniques, draw up an instrument for an initial survey, write a prospectus. I do not believe I was teaching composition. Perhaps it should be called pre-composition. I was trying to teach her how to think, to organize her thoughts, to ask questions, to employ a penetrating mind. I probably did not succeed. I do not believe she will ever finish

this thesis. I do not believe she is capable of writing such a thesis, although she apparently was capable of taking course work and writing a term paper.

The speech communications student was doing a study of the role the United States Congress has played in controlling and/or censoring violence on radio and television. He arrived in my shop with a bleeding prospectus and an aching heart, having had both torn up by his director. With justification, I should add.

He did not know where he was going or what he was trying to prove. He had two boxes of note cards and nary a thesis idea. By going carefully over the comments and objections of his director, I was able to explain his problem in language different from that being employed by his director. Frankly, my work on this whole project was more psychological than pedagogical. As his director knocked him down, I picked him up and encouraged him. (Having done the knocking down myself with the two English majors discussed earlier, I know which is the easier job.)

This student needed to find a viable thesis, a firm place to stand amidst his swirl of notecards. Such, it seems to me, is basic at this level of writing. He found it in the course of the semester, and on his fourth try wrote a prospectus which was approved by his committee. He also wrote his first chapter and was well into his second the last I saw of him. I predict he will finish the thesis and get his degree.

Two other of my original seven enrollees, however, did not even finish the composition course. Both withdrew early because neither was

willing or able to work steadily along on his or her own. In this tutorial business, my policy is firm: the student who misses one scheduled appointment without letting me know in advance or who shows up once without having written a substantial number of words receives a stern warning; the student who does either a second time is requested to leave the course.

The seventh student did not want instruction in composition so much as she wanted help with the English language. A native of Brazil, she is a linguistics student at the masters level. Her needs were such that we decided she would do better with me than with the instructor involved entirely with international students. Again, as you can see, attention to individual needs is a major factor in this whole program. Although she did work during the semester on a major paper in one of her linguistics courses, I would say that her work was primarily in the area of colloquial English, both spoken and written. She wanted, for example, to get rid of some of her accent. So we talked; I corrected; she practiced. Maybe she picked up some of my accent, but at least it is not that of a native speaker of Portugese. She wanted to practice reading and understanding lots of different kinds of English, so she read in histories, science texts, biographies, popular magazines, and wrote paraphrases. We agreed that she should try to turn the original style into colloquial, informal English. It seems to me she was doing very basic things for a person who wants to try to achieve a native's command of the tongue. These particular needs could not have been met nearly so well if she were listed from the beginning as a member of a class rather than as an individual taking a tutorial course.

In conclusion, I must admit that in clock hours, these seven students took up considerably more of my time than a seven-student literature course generally consumes. But the two lazy ones were quickly gone and my load was cut by 2/7ths. The results were visible, too. I despair often (and so perhaps do you) of seeing what effect a literature course has upon a student, but the effects in the one-to-one composition course are clearly visible. How lasting they are is another matter. I believe that four of these seven students accomplished, or got themselves on the way to accomplishing, their own goals. I believe that they also learned some things that they will be able to continue to use in their writing in the future. At least, it's pretty to thing so.

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